



Creative English for Families with Pre-school Children

*Family Learning Programme (Pilot)
Evaluation Report*

March to July 2015



Department
for Communities
& Local Government



Creative English for Families with Pre-school Children

An Evaluation Report on the Pilot Family Learning Programme

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Background & rationale

Creative English for Families with Pre-school Children is a development of the family learning model developed within Dr Anne Smith's PhD research, with the goal of supporting refugee and migrant families in achieving a sense of belonging in the UK.

While family learning sessions were having a positive impact on the parent-child bond and sense of integration into UK society, engaging the most-hard-to-reach was a challenge, as activities where the child was perceived to be the main beneficiary are not prioritised by the adult in some cultures. Eagerness to learn English which will help individuals to achieve functional integration into society was the primary motivating factor for parents.

Childcare is a significant barrier to women wishing to access English language provision. While FaithAction was able to offer funding under the Creative English programme via the Department of Communities and Local Government contract, many hubs chose to spend some of this grant on a crèche. However, as Creative English moves into the licence model, it is necessary to find alternative ways of addressing this barrier. Many children accessing these crèches also demonstrated behaviour consistent with a lack of play or interaction with adults at home, which impacts negatively on their progress in relation to the Early Years Statutory Framework.

A report commissioned by FaithAction on Creative English with a volunteer-led crèche (May 2015), recognised this barrier:

'Most of the children who arrived at the crèche had very limited experiences of play and interaction with other adults and children. Children who were aged between 24 and 40 months would be running and grabbing at random toys and throwing them around. Toys like a telephone, till, spinning top, teapot and cup would be picked up and thrown. It was clear there was little or no playing with toys at home.'

In February 2015, the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) agreed to fund a pilot of the family learning programme. The project was delivered between April and July 2015.

The project

Five participating organisations received 2 days training; a session plan booklet and resource case (including puppets, role-play items and craft materials) for the 10 week programme, which combined activities to benefit the needs of adults and children. Data was collected via at least one visit from Dr Anne Smith to observe sessions in progress; completion of DCLG questionnaire and additional parent/child progress monitoring form. There was telephone and online support and

opportunity to feedback on the programme and its strengths and weaknesses to further enhance the redrafting of the family learning guide for the complete programme. Some members of the team shared ideas, reflections and encouragement via a 'secret' Facebook group.

Within the programme, each session seeks to strengthen the relationship between parent and child by working on activities together through craft, role-play, story-telling and games using English language. A group participatory storytelling provides a fun, humorous, shared experience for the parent and child in each session. However, it also addresses the adult's functional language needs, through a focus on scenarios within the story such as shopping, doctors and emergency services. Sessions include activities pitched at the adult to develop their language skills, while the child engages in free play. The relaxed atmosphere during craft activities and free play gives opportunity for parents to build relationships with one another, combatting isolation and developing a supportive network which will outlive the short term programme itself.

Pilot Centres

The pilot intentionally tested some different models of staffing and contextualising the project to see if there was an impact on the outcomes of delivery: children's centres; community centres with a faith background and faith centres. One of the hosting organisations delivered in two different venues in two different categories.

The venues were:

- Dyson Gardens Children's Centre, Birmingham
- All Saints Children's Centre, Redbridge
- Castle Point Community Hub, Dagenham:
- St Paul's Crossover, Birmingham
- The Stopsley Project, Luton
- Shri Guru Ravidass Gurdwara, Bradford

All the lead facilitators on the family learning pilot had experience of teaching adults or children, primarily Early Years. All groups utilised volunteers but most had a paid member of staff as the lead facilitator, in line with the higher level of skill demanded by the project than the standard Creative English project. It was harder to identify volunteers with appropriate skills to take a lead role in the project. However, the model of a skilled professional working alongside at least one volunteer is most likely to significantly upskill the volunteer and result in the best outcomes for the children.

Participants:

- 92 families across the 5 hosting organisations.
- All children age 0-4, the majority age 2-3.
- A wide range of nationalities were represented. 62% of participants came from Pakistan or Bangladesh
- All children were from backgrounds where English is not spoken at home.

Facilitator Training:

Two days of facilitator training gave more opportunity to get to know individual facilitators better than the standard one day of main Creative English programme training. Stronger relationships and a revisit from the trainer during the programme delivery has generated more interaction between the lead trainer and facilitators than on the standard Creative English programme, which can only be good for the development of the programme.

Feedback questionnaires scored effectiveness of the trainer, content, relevance, venue and overall effectiveness on a scale of 1 – 5 (5 being the highest). 100% of those trained scored it as a 4 or 5 in all areas.

Comments from the feedback forms included:

‘Enjoyable activities and role-play, incorporating learning English’

‘An exciting way of delivering useful language skills in a non-didactic approach’

‘Lots of ideas to play with and use with my families’

Most forms put ‘none’ for ‘Are there any subjects you would like to have seen included but were not?’ Other quotes included: ‘More advice on recognising outcomes’; ‘maybe longer for training, as we did get so engrossed’. The inclusion of ‘more advice on recognising outcomes’ would have been useful for volunteers, as identified in data section later.

Working through the brain development session on the training was important, as most facilitators’ reported the exaggerated and humorous delivery had been a key part of engaging all ages in the session.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

In each of the centres, data was collected on the child’s progress according to the Early Years Statutory Framework. This was collected through the observations of the facilitating team, but also through the observations of the parents. In most centres, parents completed a simple questionnaire which recorded their responses in the target areas but also whether they had used activities at home. A further evaluative activity took place in most centres, either through making suggestions for how to generate brain links for Monster or through putting leaves on a tree on which they had written comments about what they thought of the programme. The evaluative nature of the brain link task should be highlighted in the teacher session plans and the tree task offered as a suggestion. Children enjoyed scribbling on the leaf and in some cases the oldest children could articulate something they’d liked in relation to it. Their verbal comments were also noted down as many of the participants had very low levels of literacy and otherwise would not have been able to contribute. Participants and facilitators also fed back on each session about what activities they had enjoyed most/learnt from most or what they found unhelpful. This will inform the final version of the programme guide, which is to be re-drafted. Responses of children to activities were also noted and taken into account. In each centre, the programme was also monitored through a visit from FaithAction to check procedures were being followed appropriately and to provide additional evidence and support on the programme. Information from each of these sources is combined to inform the following sections of this report.

Outcomes:

	Redbridge	Birmingham	Dagenham	Luton	Bradford	Pilot Totals:
Total families engaged	20	19	20	13	20	92
No. with child present who have completed	18	17	13	10	18	76
No. adults in session without child present	2	2	7	0	2	13
No. who did not complete	1	0	0	3	0	4
Child progression: playing and exploring	18	17	13	10	18	76 (100% of participating children)
Child progression: active learning	18	16	13	10	18	75 (99% of participating children)
Child progression: creating and thinking critically	18	11	11	9	20	69 (91% of participating children)*
Adult has increased enjoyment of/confidence in playing with their child	19	15	16	10	20	80 (90% of adults who completed)
Adult has increased understanding of the value of play	17	17	14	9	16	73 (82% of adults who completed)
Adult has wider range of strategies for playing and learning with their child	19	19	20	9	17	84 (94% of adults who completed)
Adult increased confidence in speaking English	19	19 **	20	10	20	88 (99% ** of adults who completed)

*age of child will impact upon their ability to progress in this area

** one participant already had very high levels of confidence at the start of the course and maintained rather than increased this

The benefits

- Children who attended regularly made significant progress in line with the Early Years Statutory Framework. Erratic attendance prevented children from building relationships with the facilitators and familiarity with routine and tasks.
- Getting parents to play with their child was challenging, but significant progress was achieved for those who attended regularly. A facilitator comment in Week 3 on the project Facebook typified the feelings in the early stages of the project:

Yay! Family learning really does work! Session one started with absolutely no parent/child interaction. A very scary prospect of ten weeks like that! Session two, we managed to encourage some mums to talk and work with their children a bit. We had session three yesterday and the mothers came willingly and were happy to do things with their children. Still a long way to go to get parents playing with their children but persevering seems to be worth it!

Later in the programme, there was a significant shift for a number of these families in the way they interacted with their child. However, there was also an inevitable regression when families did not attend consecutive weeks.

- Establishing a familiar structure and routine within the sessions was important. Moving to different areas of the room for craft, storytelling and singing helped to reinforce this and children who attended regularly quickly learnt to respond to these cues, choosing to join in with adult focussed language activities in some cases, rather than free-play, when it took place at the craft table. Some centres adopted songs to help families recognise the transition into different stages of the session, especially 'storytime' and 'tidy up' time and one session also used a 'hello' and 'goodbye' song, which named each child individually at start and end the sessions. Suggested transition songs will be added to the session guidebook.
- Most centres reported helping parents understand the impact of play on their child's brain development had been significant in changing parents' perception of play. Introducing this concept earlier in the programme and building up the brain link diagram across a number of sessions was proposed as a way of keeping this at the forefront of families' minds.
- Parents who attended regularly reported seeing new possibilities for how their child could behave at home and in some cases had started to use some of the routine songs at home: 'I didn't think my boy could sit – ever. He hears the song and runs over.'
- Delivery in a faith or community centre with a faith-basis benefitted the project in a number of ways. One benefit was the provision of volunteers to support delivery in the sessions. In two centres, volunteer families participated to model parent-child play, which was helpful in encouraging a cultural shift. Several venues included volunteers who fulfilled a grandparent role. In one case, a participant was observed confiding in an older volunteer about her worries about her child's aggression, which she did not wish to share with peers. Younger

volunteers were also important in the project, who often had more energy to play with the children and less restrictive ideas about what 'good' behaviour looked like. It is important, however, that the majority of people attending family learning are families. In one centre the number of volunteer and childless adults meant adults with children felt less comfortable that the session was actually aimed at them as intended!

- Delivery in faith and community centres gave people access to the programme who would not otherwise engage with family learning activities. In two venues this actually meant that recruitment was more difficult. However, as both these centres worked almost exclusively with Muslim parents, this was exacerbated by the timing of the project taking place over Ramadan when parents did not want to engage with new activities. Generally, a relational approach to engaging the 'hard-to-reach' families with whom these organisations already have a connection, was successful. In a well-attended family learning session in one venue, half the attendees reported coming as a result of encouragement/ invitation from a peer.
- Delivering the sessions when potential participants were already in the venue also increased the likelihood of engaging hard-to-reach families who were not already in touch with services through the children's centres. Although statistical evidence was not formally collected across the centres, discussions during monitoring visits with learners appeared to suggest learners in the venues had not engaged with this type of activity before.
- Relationships with trusted staff and other services made available in the same venue, created an opportunity for a more holistic approach to meeting families' needs. All venues had this benefit. In a faith-based centre, a former learner was observed asking advice about tax from employment. The woman was suspicious that how she was being treated didn't seem right, but could seek advice informally. In another, a learner could ask to make a phone call about her benefits which she could not afford to do otherwise. In a children's centre, a referral was observed being made due to facilitator's concerns over safeguarding in a particular family.
- As with the standard Creative English programme, additional trips and activities outside the sessions were effective in building participants' confidence to engage with new activities. This supported learners in building friendships which would outlast the sessions. After a Creative English Family learning project trip to the park, for example, two mums took their children to a community centre activity which they would not have considered before, but felt confident to do so with the support of one another. In another example, learners went shopping together after the park, after agreeing to help one another with buggies. This was the first time they had been out without their husbands.

Common challenges

- The biggest challenge across the pilot was achieving regular attendance from participants. This in part could be attributed to the time of year which the pilot had to be delivered in: the summer term. The constraints of the contract meant the majority of delivery took place between the end of April and July. Attendance at all activities in participating venues was lower during this season, due to Ramadan, preparations for Eid and also end of term events such as sports days and school assemblies for older children in the family. During the heat wave, parents did not want to bring their child to an indoor activity. On explaining her absence for two weeks, one mum simply explained 'I felt lazy.'

- Some facilitators initially found delivering sessions aimed at parents and children together challenging. Understandably, facilitators who had a background in Early Years education found it more challenging to meet the varied needs of adult and child learners within the same session. This was addressed by working more closely with the practitioner in one case to identify these characteristics. For example, humour is important. In another centre, the facilitator utilised her experience of working with families of young children to emphasize the language learning as something the adult was helping their child with. This was very effective and parents were observed questioning and praising their child effectively in the session, encouraging them to speak English. One of these mothers explained: 'I do not normally sit with my child like this. This is new for me, but I see he likes it when I am interested in what he is doing.' These factors will have an impact on the child's school readiness. A more explicit articulation about how to deliver the session in a way that suits adults and children in the training or/and session guidebook is needed.
- Getting parents to value their child's work enough to take it home was a challenge in most venues. When items children had made were taken home, parents often used them at home, with the child sometimes being able to initiate the activity, even when the adult was not intending to play. Adults were often happy to take their own work home but needed reminders to take their children's. In Luton, they used this work to make a display and found this was helpful in generating pride and interest as children pointed out what they had made in subsequent weeks.
- Improvement in English for the adult was not as dramatic as for the standard Creative English programme. This is to be expected as the demands of this project are quite complex with the balance of time focussed on parent and child more than the language. However, learners did report increases in confidence, especially in talking to people from different cultural backgrounds. For some learners, this was a completely new experience, which they initially found daunting. The focus on the creative tasks and activities, however, meant that this interaction had happened more easily than they anticipated.
- An additional section was commissioned for the Creative English database to capture the family and child development outcomes. Although the family learning tabs were quick to use on yes/no statements, the relations tab and filling in main CE form was confusing. It was also difficult to catch supporting evidence, due to the existence of only one free text box. The majority of facilitators therefore also completed a paper-based questionnaire for each family. It was also difficult for some facilitators to notice progress of individual children when they were focussed on teaching the session and were the only skilled person in the room. The supporting volunteers weren't sufficiently skilled to recognise progression and sometimes only noticed behaviour rather than play. e.g. On one occasion, for example, when asked to comment on progression she had noticed, the volunteer focussed entirely on 'naughty' behaviours of child and disengagement of the parent, when an experienced practitioner had observed and could evidence considerable progress for that family from a low starting point.

The session guidebook

- Feedback on the session plans was generally positive. However, this programme cannot be successfully delivered without the flexibility for the facilitator to tailor it to their own group. This is due to the range of ability both in terms of the English level of the parents and the

capabilities of the child, which will be particularly pronounced due to the young age of the children. Some excellent examples of tailoring the programme were witnessed or shared via the Facebook group or written course feedback.

- Facilitator and learner feedback from parents and children (where possible) was helpful in advising on the final draft of the facilitator's course guidebook. Practitioners were willing to share ideas which will ultimately enhance the resource significantly, and there were a number of cases when facilitators designed additional resources, which they shared with the other pilot centres via the Facebook group. The wide range of potential abilities and ages within any given session, means it is most effective if the session plans continue to have a core structure with a menu of follow-up options. These additional activities can be added to this menu. Practitioners who delivered stories purely with the children in mind found some of the stories were too long and complex for the children. These practitioners simplified the stories for their own groups. Practitioners who delivered with the goal of engaging the whole family did not report the same challenges, although all children will not have sat for the whole story. Across groups, facilitators reported an increase in the length of time children could sit and concentrate for and children were observed engaging with the storytelling in multiple ways, interacting with the puppets and props. A flexibility from the storyteller to involve and shape the wording to encompass the actions of the children was particularly effective.
- Some resource sheets were considered to have too high a level of English: most notably the cartoon strip of 'The Farmer's Headache' story and the 999 conversation.
- The language objectives around 'skills and experience' in Session 9, were considered difficult for learners to understand in several groups. More support in defining the words could be included in the final draft of the guidebook.
- The junk modelling activity in Session 8 was not used in most centres as it was not deemed sufficiently satisfying for the adult, as the results did not necessarily look like what was intended. A numbers of centres trialled a more structured emergency vehicle task, from cereal boxes, which the children enjoyed.
- The simplest crafts, which did not involve a 'right' answer in terms of how to put pieces together were most effective in engaging parents and children together, like the medicine pots in Session 4. Some parents found it challenging to allow their child to 'spoil' their work otherwise, which reduced parent-child interaction.

The resource case:

- All facilitators liked the puppets for the storytellings and the ease of having all the required resources in the case for the session. Ease of delivery for volunteers was beneficial, although several volunteers chose to supplement them with additional resources. They said this was part of their enjoyment in personalising the delivery further, rather than because resources were missing. A supplementary pack of the consumables should be offered to centres for the continued delivery of the programme.
- In centres with no pre-existing resources, the resource kit was invaluable and was widely enthused about by families and facilitators. Some of the children in the pilot groups did not have access to any toys at home, so were particularly excited by getting to play with

resources at the session. Free play was an important part of most of the sessions. Rooms with a lot of toys available took longer to get children to engage with the family learning activities. However, centres with a small numbers of toys available for free play found this helpful, as it gave opportunity for the adults to engage with a language task on a more sophisticated level while the children were occupied.

- The 2 groups which were delivered in children's centres did not need the full set of resources, as the children's centres were already equipped with a till, play food and a doctor's kit. However, additional items were beneficial, as more families could use the same equipment at the same time.
- The range of toys provided in the kit also offered the adults the benefit of supporting their vocabulary development and confidence. One learner reported being much more confident when she went to the doctor's because she now knew the names of the items the doctor's used, having handled them from the toy set with her child. Another reported having found practicing her own numeracy skills in English with the toy till useful.
- The set of play dough cutters were not widely used, so could be omitted from the resource case in future. More small plastic boxes to store art materials once packs were open would be a useful addition to the case.
- Only 3 of the 5 facilitators made playdough for their sessions. It may be worth buying some for resource case, for consistency of having resources already available.

Case Studies:

Samah:

In Week 1, Samah engaged very little. Her mum did not make eye contact with her during the session and put her in her buggy, parking it behind her, out of her eye line and out of sight of activities when she was invited to try a craft with her child. Over the programme, Samah joined in with increasing confidence and would do craft, sit for a story and was able to do simple role play. By Week 3, mum and child were doing activities together. Mum began to see how much her child enjoyed role-play and how it made them talk and laugh together – that playing with her child could be enjoyable for her too. 'I only come to class to learn English. I didn't think I would like this class with children, but I enjoy [it] and Samah [is] different, [it is] happy time'. Samah developed the ability to make independent choices in activities and mum used the items they had made in the sessions to play together at home.

Amah:

Amal's mum does not engage with him at all. She does not make eye contact with him and, in Week 1, he runs wildly round the room throwing toys, like the till, rather than playing with them. In Week 2, she tells a volunteer he is always biting her and she doesn't know what to do. She is embarrassed by how her son behaves, so she doesn't want to take him out. By the end of the programme, mum is making eye contact with her son and is engaging him in simple role-play and other activities. He will sit for 5-7 minutes doing a craft task and will interact with the puppets and songs. Mum has

been encouraged in some new behaviour management strategies modelled by the team and says she “likes him” more as it is easier to do things with him, “like other children”.

Mohammad:

Mohammad’s mum is worried about her son going to school because he doesn’t understand any English and she doesn’t know what they do in an English school. She is scared he won’t learn properly and that she can’t help him because she can’t speak English. On Week 1 Mohammad will only wander round the room and look cautiously at activities from a distance. By the end of the programme, he can sit and listen to a story and do a craft activity. He understands basic instructions like ‘sit down’, ‘come here’, ‘show me’ in English and can use some English vocab himself, relating to session topics. His mum is able to ask him questions in English which he can answer, related to session themes. She feels more confident that he will be ok in school and that she understands more about how he will be learning, which is different to her own experiences of school. While he is at school, she will now attend the adult Creative English course, which will help her with the language she will need to talk to his teachers and interact at school more fully.

Parental feedback:

Example quotes from leaves (with original grammar and spelling):

“Me and my child enjoid vary much we had a voiry good time in this class”

“This English class change me a lot. Now I am confident and more confident after joining this class. My daughter also enjoyed a lot after joining this class”

“I have enjoyed the activities I have used the activities at home with my child So thank you Very much”

“We liked using puppets to tell and make up stories”

Example verbal comments (with original grammar):

“I like best class for adults, but I suppose [it] is important we learn these things too [how to play with child]”

“Normally, I am scared to go out without husband. Here I make friends. Now I take [my] children to the park.”

“I enjoy very much and children are learning. I do these activities with [my] son. He enjoy[s] them.”

Conclusion:

The pilot project has been successful in generating improved outcomes for children. The focus on the language engaged parents who would not otherwise participate in child focussed activities. It needs however to be trialled outside of Ramadan and the summer end-of-term period. The number of adults who wished to access the programme while their children were in school indicates a wider need for community pre-entry language activities. The play-based activities when pitched without being patronising were very accessible to learners without formal education or with learning

disabilities. In Dagenham, a number of Roma adults attended regularly. However, while a minority of adults without children present did not impact negatively on the sessions, having too many in the group shifted the focus away from the children. In future, sessions should only be accessible to an adult with a child present. Dyson Gardens found the sessions were very helpful in supporting children settling in the crèche. They therefore propose to use 3 of these sessions as a precursor to more formal ESOL provision they are delivering.

Recommendations:

- Develop a separate whole community approach to family learning, which can meet needs of adults and older children. A child being present in the session should be a requirement of attendance on this programme.
- Work with a group of target parents to find strategies that will encourage them to attend more regularly. Trial strategies to improve attendance, including trialling at a different time of year.
- Develop the training to make explicit the qualities and strategies which make the programme suitable for adults and children.
- Add additional section to guide book which gives tips on how to facilitate activities with a focus on the parent preparing their child for school and encouraging the child to speak English.
- Add two sessions to make it the programme 12 sessions long, in line with Barking and Dagenham's analysis of Early Years Foundation Stage Profile attainment data which suggested attendance at 12 play and communication sessions had the maximum impact on child development.
- In the ideal, more lead in time is needed for a complex project addressing the needs of adults and children together to ensure all stakeholders can feed in to all stages of the process and ensure research data is collected with maximum efficiency.
- More admin support for hubs: either lower grant for delivery of project and the difference used to upload paper-based forms submitted by hubs for record keeping or additional training/support for administrative volunteers. Most volunteer facilitators will have excellent people skills and a passion for the community but the administrative role is not perceived as important or valuable which can result in poor quality/functional data, less useful for advocacy.

References:

Gibbons, Carolyn (2015), 'Creative English Volunteer-led Crèche Evaluation Report' Dagenham: FaithAction



82%

of adults have an increased understanding of the value of playing.

"I am more confident speaking English and my daughter is very happy. It's good to do things together"

Creative English Family Learning was developed by FaithAction. Based on Dr Anne Smith's theses refined during her PhD at Queen Mary University of London.

Contact us to find out how you can use Family Learning and other Creative English Alliance programmes in your area.

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